

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From *Banib* to Bunyip: Tracking Bricolage and Knowledge Systems in Colonized Aboriginal Spirituality

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Abstract

This article considers the Australian ‘bunyip’, a cryptid that has captured the colonial imagination since the European invasion. In doing so, the article will track the transformation of the creature through the invasion of Australia, and subsequently raise concerns regarding the application of an ‘apolitical’ bricolage in cases of myths translated across knowledge systems, especially in the context of colonialism. It considers the relationship between cryptozoology and the natural sciences, as well as the origins of the bunyip within Indigenous cosmologies. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the transformation of the bunyip from Indigenous contexts to its current position as a pseudoscientific cryptid.

Introduction

From the outset of the British colonization in Australia, the bunyip has been a mysterious figure; a creature looming in the dark of the bushland waiting to prey on settlers who approach the foreign terrain with too much confidence. The bunyip, as the modern Australia knows it, has been influenced by the imaginations of both Indigenous Australians and colonizers. In this way, it is a product of colonialism: a First Nations concept distorted by invading worldviews and appropriated into a new form. This article will consider Indigenous and colonial versions of the bunyip within the context of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage. In doing so, the article will track the transformation of the creature through the invasion of Australia, and subsequently raise concerns regarding the application of an ‘apolitical’ bricolage in cases of myths translated across knowledge systems, especially in the context of colonialism. I begin by outlining Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage, notably utilizing its original description and not the more individualistic applications it has taken on more recently. Next, I present the case of the ‘bunyip’, beginning with its Indigenous origins as a water-spirit and then proceeding to its interpretations through colonialism to the present day. This will then be further contextualized through a discussion of knowledge systems, considering in particular the differences between

First Nations and Western approaches to knowledge. Finally, I return to bricolage, deconstructing its assertions in the wake of the case study.

Building Bricolage

Claude Lévi-Strauss first introduced the anthropological term ‘bricolage’ in his book *The Savage Mind* (1962). That text considers attempts to identify a ‘definitive’ version of a myth with many different iterations, particularly in the context of Indigenous mythmaking. The word is originally French, referring to a kind of craftsmanship consisting of cobbled-together materials, as opposed to something made of carefully selected materials. Lévi-Strauss analogizes folklore to this approach to building, describing myth as something which ‘expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited’ (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 11). As such, myth is identified as being not static, but constantly shifting to account for new information made known to its society. Even if a new concept is wholly unfamiliar and unknowable to a community, it is permeated through its capacity to be interpreted as related to a pre-existing idea (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 13). Even if the previous worldview is utterly usurped by a discovery, the remaining pieces can be built into the new version of the myth (Sutton 1988, 253).

Although details in myths may change, the implicit conception of the whole remains consistent. It must be understood, however, that chronologically newer versions of a myth are not seen as superior or more complete in comparison to older accounts. All of the versions of a myth, both individually and in total, comprise a full, valid version. Identifying the definitive form is not a matter of chronology, but totality. This is the approach taken by contemporary studies of folklore, with the goal generally being not to identify a *complete* version of a story, but to catalogue its various iterations over time (Johnson 2012, 359). This is, of course, also at times practised in anthropology; the main difference being that folklorists generally consider narratives as phenomena in themselves, as opposed to anthropologists generally approaching them as a facet of a larger study of a culture (Johnson 2012, 360). It must also be noted that this approach necessarily considers the limitations to what a mythology can draw inspiration from. It is defined by what knowledge is available to the community at any given time. By recognizing these pre-existing limitations, it is clearer what effects are brought by the addition of a new piece of information. Since its inception, the concept of bricolage has transformed somewhat in how it is understood and utilized in the disciplines of anthropology and especially folklore. Its use in religious studies has given it a secondary context of applying to individual editing of one’s own belief system; this is not relevant to this article, and Lévi-Strauss’s original conception will be utilized.

Bricolage as an approach to understanding myths is particularly concerned with the integrity of Indigenous lore in dialogue with colonial contact and subsequent imperialism. It is, at its core, a matter of compromise. This explains the rise of religious syncretism as colonists introduced Christianity to various First Nations groups across the globe. Rather than entirely changing their religious traditions,

Indigenous mythology transformed to account for the new system of beliefs. It must be noted that this was not a matter of equal compromise between two parties with differing worldviews; missionaries largely sought to wholly convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity and did not view the new, blended versions of their traditions as a success (Schwarz and Dussart 2010, 5). The differing knowledge systems of First Nations and colonial groups similarly led to wildly divergent understandings of concepts specific to one of their cultures. One common example of this is that creatures considered mythical by Indigenous cultures, particularly those of more complicated ontology, were often mistaken by Westerners to be literal taxonomic accounts of an endemic animal (Clarke 2018b, 43). The bunyip serves as one example of this. Through comparison of Indigenous and colonial accounts of the bunyip, one can identify the core approaches to knowledge and meaning-making that have influenced each interpretation.

Here, it is pertinent to describe some English and Scottish myths of a similar cloth, as they inevitably contributed to colonizers' understanding of water-related spirits (such as the bunyip) and their ontology. Here the most relevant examples are bogies associated with water. Accounts of bogies are, generally, stories deliberately constructed to dissuade people from certain undesirable behaviours, including venturing into places that are either dangerous or considered off-limits to laypeople (Briggs 1976, 313). They are generally told to young children, and in many cases they are so effective that they stay with them far into their adulthood; Simon Young recalls speaking to an older person from Lancashire who remains wary of water-spirits and teaches her grandchildren to do the same, as recently as 2019 (Young 2019, 28). The first example is the *each uisge*, 'water horse', a creature somewhat similar to a kelpie believed to inhabit lochs and coastlines in Scotland. Far more dangerous than its kelpie cousin, its defining features are its ability to shape-shift, its adhesive skin that traps any gullible rider, and its taste for human flesh, although it apparently finds the liver distasteful (Briggs 1976, 116). While not regularly malicious, the *each uisge* is inclined to take revenge upon those who desecrate its lake home, or who mock the appearance of its human form (Thomas 1862, 130–31). The other applicable examples are all quite similar to one another, with their key differences being the region in which they are supposedly found. These are the Yorkshire grindylow, Jenny Greenteeth, and Peg Powler of the River Tees (Briggs 1976, 206, 242, and 323). All three are water-demons who often take the form of women, especially hags, and drown children who play too close to the edge of rivers and ponds. Of these, Jenny Greenteeth has the widest distribution, being named variously in the recollections of people from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire, Shropshire, and the Lake Counties (Young 2019, 26). She is often associated with plants such as duckweed, or foam lines on waterways, with these being taken as either part of her anatomy or signs of her presence (Vickery 1983, 248). Indeed, some sources identify Jenny's duckweed hair as being a key aspect of threat, with children slipping on it on the banks and subsequently drowning. Others describe her as pulling children in with her long arms and recognize duckweed as a sign of her

presence (Young 2019, 28). With these existing ideas of water-spirits in mind, we can now begin to uncover the shape of the bunyip.

Approaching the Bunyip

Understandings of the bunyip differ wildly between Indigenous narratives and European accounts. In order to establish why this transformation took place, it is first necessary to identify the qualitative divergences within these interpretations. The Indigenous bunyip is established through narratives and the broader context of the ontology of Aboriginal spirituality, not necessarily relying on direct descriptions and anecdotal accounts. In comparison, European interpretations rely heavily on eyewitnesses and attempts to formally categorize the taxonomy of the creature. These differences underlie fundamental divergences in how each group creates and communicates knowledge within their societies. This chapter will juxtapose traditional Indigenous and emerging colonist versions of the bunyip and subsequently discuss the aesthetic, narratological, and epistemological discrepancies between the two. In order to fully contextualize the Indigenous form of the creature, however, it is pertinent to first develop an understanding of Australian cultural epistemology and ontology—specifically, the Dreaming.

The Original ‘Bunyip’

In order to comprehend the origins of the creature known as the ‘bunyip’, it is vital to understand the complex ontology associated with Aboriginal mythology. The terms ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘the Dreaming’ are widely used across Australia to refer to the spiritual beliefs of the continent’s First Nations peoples. Most often, the ‘Dreamtime’ is used as a location for myths, constituting both a time and a place (Charlesworth 1984, 12). However, the Dreamtime’s actual nature—and, indeed, its construction in Indigenous culture outside erroneous translations—is far more complex than this colloquial use may imply. The term is attributed to Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, whose interactions with Arrernte people, near what is now called Alice Springs, led them to attempt to translate the idea of *alcheringa* or *altjiranga*, referring to the primordial period in which the ancestors and spirits first laid down the Law, as ‘Dreamtime’ (Charlesworth 1984, 12). This is in fact a mistranslation, as the Aranda word for dream, *alcheri*, is superficially similar to *alcheringa*, but the two are actually linguistically unconnected (Dean 1996, 13). Despite this error, ‘Dreamtime’ has survived as the popular term for Indigenous spiritual ideas, even being reappropriated by Aboriginal groups (Dean 1996, 19). However, this does have a reductionist dimension. It implies a monolithic conception of Indigenous spirituality, combining over two hundred languages and over five hundred nations; while many of these groups have similarities between their traditions, they remain distinct with their own specific traditions and myths (Dean 1996, 4). As an umbrella term, ‘Dreaming’ embodies a number of meanings. As Peter Sutton describes it, the Dreaming is a matter of dialogue between existence and narrative. The act of

creation is at once long established and ongoing, ‘in which changes in the status quo are effected by the interlocutors and their audience’ (Sutton 1988, 254). There is a complex temporality that underlies Dreaming. This also demonstrates the close relationship between Aboriginal society and spiritual belief; one cannot exist without the other.

While Indigenous culture and spirituality remain alive in Australia, it is unavoidable that their nature and details have been affected by the invasion. As Philip A. Clarke points out, it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the state of Indigenous groups’ spiritual beliefs prior to the invasion, due to both issues of context in translation and the destruction of intergenerational knowledge (Clarke 1999b, 57). Steve Bevis particularly interrogates the presence of the Dreaming in the lives of Indigenous Australians who have been displaced from their traditional lands, including those who identify with other religious practices.¹ He asserts that the Dreaming and Indigenous Law are inherent to Aboriginal culture and identity and are therefore present even among those who may be disconnected from their heritage or do not follow traditional spirituality (Bevis 2017, 328). The most important element here—and, indeed, in Dreaming more broadly—is connection to the land, including return to Country for those who were not born on or do not inhabit their ancestral region (Bevis 2017, 342). No matter what an Indigenous individual’s situation, they are always connected to the land by virtue of their lineage. As one elder stated in a conversation with Bevis, ‘You can’t lose your spirituality’ (Bevis 2017, 330).

Indeed, the land is the most vital dimension of the Dreaming across traditional Indigenous cultures and nations. It embodies indigeneity and the idea of the ancestral spirits, as well as the cultures that have survived even in the face of invasion. In this way, the Dreaming is inseparable from Indigenous views of the land. This refers to both the landscape of Australia in general, and also to the specific area traditionally inhabited by a given nation. As an Aboriginal person inhabits their land, or indeed returns to it, they invoke the specific myths and ideas of their people’s ancestral Dreaming, and through this they are connected to the Law. This understanding of Aboriginal ontology provides clear context for more specific cultural ideas, including the bunyip.

Before we delve into a deeper understanding of the bunyip, however, it is vital to distinguish where the creature exists within the context of Aboriginal cosmology. While the Dreaming is an essential backdrop for all discussion of Indigenous myth, the bunyip is in fact not a creature of the Dreamtime. Rather, it is a spirit-being. Spirit-beings are another category of inhabitants of the landscape, alongside humans and Dreaming figures. The term covers a wide range of beliefs, with the unifying factor being their distinction from creative ancestors (Clarke 2018a, 19). They did not help to shape the land, but simply inhabit it (Clarke 1999a, 151). Spirit-beings are rarely seen and are generally considered intelligent, further differentiating them from animals. They are often positioned as opponents to humans in their claim to parts of the landscape, being either actively aggressive or at least hostile. The bunyip is a water spirit-being and has a claim to water systems such as billabongs (small, isolated ponds generally found in bushland).

The word ‘bunyip’ originated as *banib* in the Wergaia dialect of the Wemba Wemba languages of south-eastern Australia, in what is now called the Mallee region of Victoria (Clarke 2007, 142; 2003, 386). It was originally described as an amphibious spirit-being in this area, with various accounts associating a wide range of characteristics with it, including fur, feathers, fins, teeth, and tusks (Mulvane 1994, 36). While ‘banib’ originally referred to a creature specifically known to the Wemba Wemba people, the pronunciation’s change to ‘bunyip’—with some accounts by colonizers using ‘bunyup’, demonstrating a gradual evolution of language—marked a parallel shift in connotation, being used by Europeans to refer to a broad range of Indigenous beliefs in creatures with an arbitrary set of characteristics (Mulvane 1994, 36). This is in part due to European interpretations of Indigenous stories as describing a real animal, rather than a creature of more complex ontology, and the subsequent assumption that its habitat would encompass much of the south-east.² As such, a number of distinct spirit-beings came to be referred to as bunyips (Holden 2001, 12). It is somewhat difficult to retroactively identify these various beings outside Wemba Wemba mythology due to the destruction of many Indigenous languages and the changes in their myths following the invasion. However, some colonial documents do provide insight into the former names of bunyip creatures, including the *kianpraty* in the Wathawurrung language and the *wawee* of what is now the Liverpool Plains (Holden 2001, 126). Some of the common characteristics of supposed bunyips are their black skin, their amphibious nature, and their threat to children (Clarke 2007, 147). For instance, Mark Wilson of the Yaraldi people in what is now South Australia describes a water spirit-being that was originally called the *mulyawonk*, which would lie submerged in the shallow waters near the edge of a lake waiting for human victims (Clarke 2007, 149). Its long, matted hair resembled waterweed, assisting its camouflage (Clarke 2007, 149). It is worth noting that this bears a striking similarity to Jenny Greenteeth’s duckweed hair; although given the vast geographical separation of the Yaraldi and the people of Lancashire, this is likely a simple case of synchronicity. This is in most ways identical to the *banib*, but the detail of the creature’s hair suggests that it was originally a similar but distinct mythical being for the region’s Aboriginal groups. Indeed, these regional differences reflect the role of land in Dreaming; while landscapes may be similar to one another across nations, each region has details and nuances with a particular history and significance to its inhabitants (Bevis 2017, 329). The same is true of myths and the beings and creatures that inhabit them. Despite subsequent interpretations, the *banib* is specific to the Wemba Wemba.

However, it is not only the *banib* that contributed to the idea of the ‘bunyip’ as it emerged from invasion, and this article must therefore consider not only Wemba Wemba stories of the bunyip, but also other geographically adjacent ideas that have been interpreted as the same creature. This includes myths from a number of language groups along the southern and eastern coasts of the continent (Clarke 2003, 386). In recounting these tales, it is also vital to note that Indigenous stories taken verbatim from regional cultures without a white intermediary are rare. While these stories are Aboriginal tales, they are not identical to those originally told prior to

invasion. It is important to understand that while the word ‘bunyip’ is used in many of these retellings, it is likely not what the respective creatures would have been called in the original languages of the various myths (Bevis 2017, 328). They are almost certainly informed by European beings such as the each uisge in their capacity as water-spirits who kidnap victims to drown, as well as Jenny Greenteeth as a freshwater bogey intended to highlight the danger of being careless around water.

One example of a bunyip myth comes from the Katoomba people in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. It offers an explanation for why a koala’s baby clings to its mother’s back. In this story, koalas and bunyips were at one time close friends; if any humans tried to harm the koala, the bunyip would burrow beneath them and have them fall into a deep hole to die (Peck 1925, 97). One particular bunyip that lived in the Wollondilly was best friends with a koala, and the koala spent every night with the nocturnal bunyip, to the point of leaving its child alone in their home tree while it visited (Peck 1925, 98). The other animals were disgusted by the koala’s neglect—with the baby narrowly escaping capture by predators—and informed the mother of the kind of danger her child faced while she visited the bunyip. Since then, the mother koala has kept its baby clinging to its back so they would be together at all times (Peck 1925, 99). The bunyip is almost incidental to this myth, although it does demonstrate fear felt by the region’s peoples towards the bunyip, as well as the idea of the bunyip protecting the land on which it lives.

The Quandamooka people of Stradbroke Island have a far less sympathetic view of the bunyip in their myths. For them, the bunyip was originally a man who was cast out of his community after he ate his own totem animal, an act forbidden by Law as dictated by the Rainbow Serpent (Nunukul 1972, 62). This broken taboo turned him into an evil spirit known as the bunyip, and he vowed revenge on the people who had abandoned him. He made his home in waterholes and rainforests, roaming the land at night to devour any human he might meet (Nunukul 1972, 63). Eventually, he managed to trap some young women and enslave them as water-spirits, and to this day he remains in wait for those who travel too far from their community (Nunukul 1972, 63). This version of the bunyip provides a twofold cautionary tale. First, the consequences of breaking the Law and consuming his totem; and second, what may befall one who ventures too close to the water at night.

The caution asserted in the Quandamooka myth is echoed in the account of Henry Rankine, a Ngarrindjeri storyteller. His stories refer to the *Mulgewongk* (a variant transliteration of *mulyawonk*), which he explains is synonymous with the better-known bunyip (Holden 2001, 205). He recalls being told by his elders, ‘Don’t go and play near the water when the sun has gone down, alongside the river, because the *Mulgewongk* (the bunyip) is there and he’ll steal you’ (Holden 2001, 206). Two little boys once ignored this warning and went to play by the riverside, and one was pulled into the depths by the creature. The elders of the community dove down to the *Mulgewongk*’s cave and sang the creature to sleep in order to rescue the boy; after that, no one dared go near that river (Holden 2001, 206). Rankine explains that the elders could not kill the *Mulgewongk* as doing so would bring about extraordinarily

bad luck and painful death (Holden 2001, 206). Again, this warns against venturing too close to the water during the night, even when armed.

One thread that exists among all of these various narratives is the danger of approaching waterholes, especially at night. Socially, this has an obvious function, particularly in those stories that describe children being taken (McKay 2001, 92). If children are taught to fear the creature that lives in the water, then they will not approach the bank and therefore will not be at risk of falling in and drowning (Holden 2001, 60). This is, of course, in addition to existing concerns about wildlife such as crocodiles. These fears are supplemented by narratives such as those mentioned earlier, adding a layer of the unknown to the danger. Those who approach bodies of water fear both the wildlife that they know could be present and the spirit-beings made terrifying by aid of their own imaginations. In this way, the monster is also a manifestation of the anxiety felt by adults about children undertaking such unsafe behaviour; the danger lurks, unseen, until it is too late (Nicholls 2014). This caution around the bunyip's habitat also relates to its multifaceted ontology as a spiritual creature: it at once exists and is also a memory of the land. It is past, but still eternal. This multifaceted existence is reflected in myths that recount past events, but simultaneously express fear of an ongoing presence.

Invading Interpretations

It is impossible to know when European colonists first heard of the banib and began to filter it through a Western interpretation. The Wemba Wemba nation was first contacted by colonists in 1838 when Thomas Mitchell crossed into their territory, making this the earliest possible opportunity for the banib story to disseminate. However, it is likely that the settlers had heard of similar beliefs from other Indigenous nations and it was merely a coincidence that the banib in particular was appropriated (Jensz 2010, 73). Indeed, due to the language barrier and the colonists' lack of understanding of differences in culture between Indigenous nations, it is likely that settlers who heard of the banib myth, as well as other regional variations, assumed that the groups were describing the same creature. For instance, colonists encountered the Gamilaraay people of the now Liverpool Plains in 1818, and Captain John Forbes wrote of the wawee in 1832, still six years before the Wemba Wemba would be encountered by Europeans (Holden 2001, 126). This points to the bunyip being introduced into the colonists' imagination even before the word was formed. By 1838, it was no wonder that further revelations regarding Indigenous descriptions of such a creature only served to strengthen these established ideas, fuelled by existing European impressions of water-spirits.

Following the dissemination of the bunyip idea across the eastern coast of the continent, European settlers quickly became fascinated by the idea of an aquatic beast as yet undescribed by naturalists. The hysteria around strange and potentially hostile new creatures was of course fuelled by the animals being classified by Europeans at the time, including the platypus, an infamously chimeric specimen (Griffiths 1988, 85). Given the lack of a single description of the bunyip, it is

unsurprising that sightings spread rapidly through settlements, each with their own varied descriptions of what a bunyip actually looked like. On 19 June 1847, *Bell's Life in Sydney* reported:

That apocryphal animal of many names, commonly designated 'The Bunyip' has, according to a correspondent of the Sydney Morning Herald, been seen on the Murrumbidgee. It is described as being about as big as a six months old calf, of a dark brown colour, a long neck, a long pointed head, large ears, a thick mane of hair from the head down the neck, and two large tusks. It is said to be an amphibious animal, as it has been observed floundering in the rivers, as well as grazing on their banks. (Dixon, Ramson, and Thomas 1990, 109)

Two years earlier, on 18 July 1845, the *Observer* in Hobart had stated, 'The Bunyip ... is represented as uniting the characteristics of a bird and an alligator' (Ramson 1988, 109). The *Geelong Advertiser* concurred with this description in the same year, adding, 'When in the water it swims like a frog, and when on shore it walks on its hind legs with its head erect, in which position it measures twelve or thirteen feet in height. Its breast is said to be covered with different coloured feathers' (Edmonds 2018, 85). Further, the *Moreton Bay Free Press* on 15 April 1857 recorded, 'Mr Stocqueler informs us that the bunyip is a large freshwater seal, having two small paddles or fins attached to the shoulders, a long swan-like neck, a head like a dog, and a curious bag hanging under the jaw, resembling the pouch of a pelican' (Dixon, Ramson, and Thomas 1990, 109).

One other particular instance of bunyip 'evidence' was a skull found in the Hawkesbury River in 1841 (Edmonds 2018, 81). This skull—which Penny Edmonds refers to as the 'Macleay skull' due to its ongoing exhibition in the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney—was quickly sent to the Royal Society in Hobart, where it was subsequently declared as evidence of some large creature not yet known to science (Edmonds 2018, 83). Excitement around the discovery peaked further in 1846 when a second, similar skull was found in the Murrumbidgee River (Holden 2001, 90). However, the hope of identifying some new, shy beast was dashed just a year later when the Alexander Macleay published a statement regarding the skulls. They were not, he explained, evidence of a bunyip or other water-dwelling creature, but rather the remains of deformed foals (Holden 2001, 90; Edmonds 2018, 85; Clark 2018a, 32). He urged his fellow naturalists to pursue future discoveries with more appropriate scientific rigour, citing Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's mantra, *natura non facit saltus*—'Nature does not make jumps' (Edmonds 2018, 86). Despite this setback, members of the Royal Society continued to search for their bunyip (Figure 1).³

Despite the conflicting descriptions, all of these claims were understood to fall under the banner of 'bunyip'. Some common traits are identifiable among these accounts. The bunyip is generally said to be dark in colour and amphibious. This latter characteristic potentially gained popularity as it gave credence to sightings both on land and in the water, substantiating a wide variety of accounts. These sightings reflect not only the imagination of colonists in the face of an unfamiliar land, but also the nature of the bunyip as a cultural idea among these settlers. Specificities of its physical traits were far less important than the broader fear associated with an unknown creature that could attack both on land and in the



Figure 1. Skull of a deformed foal; the original ‘bunyip skull’ examined by Macleay has been lost, but this more recent specimen provides a reference for what it may have looked like. Notably, it has the same single eye reported in the original skull. Image provided courtesy of the Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney.

water. This potentially reflects the fear felt by settlers when confronted with the unfamiliar fauna of the new continent: animals like crocodiles, which were fatal both terrestrially and aquatically, certainly gave them pause regarding what else could be lurking in the wild. Indeed, the threat of the unfamiliar landscape for settlers greatly influenced their perceptions of newly discovered creatures as monstrous, as well as fears of what other beasts could be lurking in the strange forests, ready to strike. However, colonial interpretations of the bunyip have not all been based in fear.

In spite of the terror that transpired from early ideas of the bunyip, the creature began to lose some of its threat as colonial populations grew. Accounts as early as 1822 tell of children pretending to be bunyips as pranks on adults in their settler communities (Holden 2001, 128). While these jokes relied on some fear in order to work, they mark the beginning of the bunyip as used in farce and comedy. The year 1871 saw the first children’s book featuring a bunyip—creatively gentrified as Mr Bunyip—befriending a young white girl and teaching her moral lessons over an afternoon (Holden 2001, 160). In 1893, John Arthur Barry published ‘Steve Brown’s Bunyip’, a short story following an Indigenous man named Steve Brown through his journey to India and interaction with an elephant, which the credulous man mistakes for a bunyip to the amusement of white readers (Holden 2001, 131). In addition to its less than generous depiction of the intelligence of Indigenous Australians, and its Orientalism, Barry’s story suggests that the mythical bunyip represents something of a ‘boy who cried wolf’ scenario; the narratives depict it as fearsome, but in reality there is nothing there. A significant aspect of these adaptations in particular is that they completely remove space from the bunyip; it no longer belongs to a particular

area, but is instead a generalized concept of a monster. This is similar to Clarke's observations on Waiyungari, an ancestor originally associated with the Ngarrindjeri people but later decontextualized by Europeans and transplanted to a broader, pan-Indigenous mythology (Clarke 1999b, 52). Holden reflects, 'Within a century of invasion, colonial Australians had effectively appropriated the story of the bunyip' (Holden 2001, 179). Not only did they take its name, but they also took any power that the creature held over those that occupied its land. In the fifty years since colonists first heard the Wegaia dialect word, the beast had gone from banib to banal in the eyes of European naturalists.

Over a century later, the idea of the bunyip in the non-Indigenous Australian zeitgeist is complicated. In the sprawl of cities and the ongoing climate crisis, buniyps hardly have a place to roam, and many people grow up unaware of the stories that so gripped the Europeans when they first invaded. Where they do appear, they are largely valued as kitsch or as a tourist attraction. One example of an individual who has jumped on the novelty of Australian cryptids, including buniyps, is Tim the Yowie Man, a self-described 'cryptonaturalist' based in Canberra. Following an alleged sighting of a 'yowie' (generally understood as an Australian version of the sasquatch) in the Snowy Mountains in 1994, Timothy Bull founded the Australian Centre for Mystery Investigation (ACMI) (Tim the Yowie Man 2001, 8). He travels the country documenting and investigating strange and paranormal reports, including those involving hidden and strange animals. His book *The Adventures of Tim the Yowie Man, Cryptonaturalist* (2001) describes his excursion to Burrawang in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales to interrogate a local legend of a bunyip. Following an overview of the history of the bunyip—which is not without its errors, such as the assertion that the Indigenous word for the creature is 'wemba-wemba'—Tim recounts his expedition into the Burrawang swamp, which ultimately yielded no substantial evidence for the presence of a bunyip or any other unclassified animal (Tim the Yowie Man 2001, 104 and 111).

While Tim is perhaps the most prolific cryptozoologist in contemporary Australia, he is by no means the only hunter. Bunyip sightings have also been investigated at Lake Burley Griffin, with one event in 2001 seeing eighty individuals gather on the banks to search for the beast (Tim the Yowie Man 2001, 115). Again, nothing substantial was found, but these expeditions do demonstrate the attitudes of modern non-Indigenous Australians towards the bunyip; namely, their view of it as a potentially real animal that could be discovered and classified through the right combination of tracking practices.

This idea of the bunyip as a cryptic monster further influences its appearances in twenty-first-century popular culture. It occupies a similar space in consciousness to the sasquatch of North America and the yeti of Nepal. All are unknown animals believed to hide in the wilderness, and all embody a point of contrast to human civilization (Clarke 2007, 147). As 'cryptids', all of these examples find themselves within the popular pantheon of supernatural monsters, alongside the likes of vampires, ghosts, and zombies (Hord 2018, 1). This is despite the obvious differences in the supposed supernatural qualities of each group. Cryptids, properly speaking, are thought of as

completely natural animals which happen to be simply hidden; the other beings are specifically paranormal and often demonic. The reasoning behind their conflation is likely related to their shared categorization as pseudoscientific, an unhelpfully broad concept in this context. They are entirely detached from their original culture context and are more or less considered to be public domain characters.

Indeed, within the last ten years, the bunyip has had two notable appearances in film: one as a major element in a local film, and one as a minor part in a blockbuster. The first is *Red Billabong* (2016), an Australian monster movie that depicts two brothers stalked by a swamp-dwelling bunyip (Sparke 2016). In this piece, the bunyip is framed using Indigenous myths, apparently seeking revenge on those not native to its land (Westwood 2017, 27). While the beast is certainly outside the realms of the normal, there is nothing inherently magical or supernatural about it. Rather, it is a natural creature that has managed to stay hidden throughout colonization (Westwood 2017, 28). Its design—a dark, bulky, almost humanoid form with red eyes and sharp teeth—is not reminiscent of descriptions from either Indigenous or colonist sources, but rather embodies the fear of a being that lurks in a landscape still hostile to its invaders (Sparke 2016). In the end, however, the creature can be hunted and dealt with like any other natural being, placing this representation closer to the visions of Tim the Yowie Man and his ilk, rather than its Dreaming origins.

The second film appearance by the bunyip is in *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019). Here, it is part of a cast of titanic beasts based on legends from around the world. Its design is somewhat similar to a sabre-toothed cat, although its shiny skin suggests a potential amphibious quality (Dougherty 2019). This is clearly inspired by historical accounts of the bunyip, but the connection to these origins ends here; it is disconnected from both the Dreaming and colonial anxieties, merely acting as another intimidating monster among many others in the film. This version does resemble the idea of the bunyip as a hidden cryptid ready to emerge from the landscape, at least more than it resembles the idea of the bunyip in Indigenous mythology. Again, the influence of the idea of the bunyip-as-cryptid is clear: it is horrifying but not necessarily magical or ontologically complex. In all of these twenty-first-century interpretations, it is no longer a creature of the Dreaming, but a hidden animal waiting to emerge from the depths of the Australian landscape. There is no question of whether a bunyip would be tangible if it existed; what is asked instead is whether this existence can be proven or not.

Comparisons and Contexts

Presenting Indigenous and colonial views of the bunyip side by side offers a clear view of the differences in perspectives on the creature. The divergences demonstrated can be sorted into three categories for ease of analysis: physicality, language used, and ideas of epistemology. Comparing the physical descriptions offered by each group is perhaps the most straightforward approach, but does not necessarily produce the most useful data, as even within individual communities, accounts of what a bunyip actually looked like varied wildly. It should be noted that

a number of Dreamtime beings across Aboriginal traditions possessed the ability to shape-shift, leading Indigenous groups almost to expect their shared mythical entities to have a number of contrasting physical descriptions. Pan-Indigenous interpretations generally agreed on ‘bunyip’ creatures being amphibious, typically dwelling in billabongs and other shallow waters but also capable of violence on land. It has dark skin and is nocturnal, preying on creatures which roam too close at night, with a particular appetite for human children. Outside these commonalities, regional variations offer additional features, such as the mulyawonk’s waterweed hair, while other cases alternately feature fins and tusks. As mentioned earlier, this is noticeably similar to English stories of Jenny Greenteeth, whose anatomy is also associated with phenomena like duckweed and water foam. In contrast, Europeans’ accounts of bunyip sightings rely far more on comparing the beast to other animals. Since it was a new concept, they required a point of reference for their descriptions, alongside their existing familiarity with European folkloric water beasts. Arguably, the existing British ideas of water-spirits also informed their approach to the ontology of the bunyip, although there are some notable divergences in their ontologies. Specifically, the bunyip was perceived as having no supernatural powers like those of European water-spirits, likely influenced by the fact that bunyips were taken seriously as animals, while the European bogies were thoroughly understood as fictitious. While nursery bogies possessed magical qualities like the ability to shape-shift and melt into the water itself, bunyips were comparatively mundane in their powers. English understandings of water-spirits were influential on the aesthetics of the bunyip and its threatening qualities, although as time and the idea of the bunyip progressed, the connection to British folk beliefs became increasingly distant. To the English, it is likely that the bunyip appeared to have more similarities with animals such as the platypus or crocodile than with the grindylow, Jenny Greenteeth, or Peg Powler. Across various eyewitness accounts from the nineteenth century, the bunyip is compared to a calf, a bird (especially an emu), an alligator, a frog, a swan, a seal, a dog, and a pelican (Holden 2001, 175; Ramson 1988, 109; Dixon, Ramson, and Thomas 1990, 110). Some accounts present a combination of several of these, with features taken from each—possibly in mind of the platypus, which was thought to be an amalgamation of a duck, a beaver, and an otter (Griffiths 1988, 86). While this is a broader set of descriptions than those offered by Indigenous groups, neither group proposes a particularly concrete set of features. The most significant aspect of this comparison is the point of reference used by Europeans to identify the bunyip; their application of Eurocentric knowledge to this new concept from a radically different culture is a thread that follows through all interpretations. While it is clear that their perspectives were influenced by European beliefs involving water-spirits, they required further local context in order to develop what they assumed to be a holistic understanding of the creature (Figure 2).

Another point of significant difference between Indigenous and colonial versions of the bunyip is the construction of narrative surrounding the creature. Aboriginal stories that involve bunyips are an aspect of community history; the narratives are frequently passed down through generations and are viewed as an aspect of Law. The



Figure 2. *Bunyip* (1935), watercolour by Gerald Markham Lewis. This work highlights the bunyip's chimeric descriptions. National Library of Australia digital collections: public domain at Wikimedia Commons.

sources of these myths are not relevant to their legitimacy as they exist within the context of spiritual reality. Colonial accounts of the bunyip are far more rooted in specific eyewitness accounts, built from reports by known and allegedly reliable members of the community. While Indigenous reports initially disseminated the idea of the bunyip among colonists, accounts from fellow settlers held far more weight in convincing communities that the creature was ontologically real. While these approaches appear disparate, they each reflect how legitimacy is constructed in their respective groups. In Aboriginal systems of knowledge, information must corroborate with Law in order to be considered real, while Europeans require clarity of source to make a judgement (Bevis 2017, 328; Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005, 11). Contrasting modes of storytelling surrounding the bunyip demonstrate the cultural attitudes that underlie differing interpretations. This revelation makes clear the significance of the diverging views towards the bunyip's epistemology by Indigenous people and Europeans.

In Indigenous approaches, the bunyip is a spirit-being, and therefore is understood through narrative recollection. Here, the idea of evidence is based in anecdotes and tales passed down through generations, becoming part of the Law. That the bunyip is not a tangible entity does not affect the validity of its presence in the landscape: it exists in the ontology of Indigenous cosmology, similar to the complex temporality of the Dreaming. It both exists and does not. When European invaders encountered these concepts and their kindred in the Dreaming, they had no Western analogue through which to interpret such layered ideas of reality, and its contents were subject to pre-existing European approaches to knowledge and myth (Clark 2018b, 36). This is the point at which the bunyip was removed from its context as a spirit and the status of cryptid was imposed upon it. Colonizers could not recognize the means through which

it previously existed, and thus their own interpretation was born. This process circles back to the application of bricolage as a framework, particularly regarding the interactions of the two described approaches to knowledge.

Knowledge, Power, and Legitimacy

It is easy to fall into the trap of defining Indigenous knowledge purely in comparison to European knowledge. To do so is to perpetuate a false binary between the two, as well as continuing the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge by contextualizing it within colonialism. Some degree of Western anthropological framework may be discernible in this discussion, given the language in which it is written, but broadly it is most appropriate to define Indigenous knowledge in terms of its construction within First Nations societies. This section will make some generalizations, but these are based on noticeable patterns among First Nations groups, especially those in Australia, and the specificities of different cultures broadly fit into the overview given in the following. These are, of course, not the only worldviews that exist across all cultures of the continent, but are the two that are relevant to this discussion.

A summary of the entire field of inquiry into Indigenous knowledge systems would barely fit into a doctoral thesis, let alone one section of an article; that said, I will outline some aspects of Aboriginal Australian knowledge that are directly relevant to this analysis. As established earlier, Aboriginal worldviews and pedagogy are extremely dynamic in nature. This is in regards both to the relationship between narrative and ontology, and between community and nature. Humans are thoroughly understood as an aspect of the landscape in the same manner as animals and spirit-beings, and thus must be considerate in their sharing of space and resources (Sutton 1988, 254). Information is taken as a dialogue between subjects, rather than an objective analysis of an object.

Indigenous systems of knowledge were not well received by Western invaders. The tide of colonialism saw upheaval among Indigenous knowledge systems as Europeans seized control of land and attempted to implement their own norms. This response of eradication was, and remains, the result of beliefs in Western superiority; only Europeans were considered civilized, and any other practices—especially those of First Nations groups—were a manifestation of savagery (Battiste 1998, 22). European knowledge was, and remains, seen as universal, and competing systems were deemed primitive and unreasonable (Battiste 1998, 21). It emphasizes compartmentalized knowledge, often decontextualizing information or phenomena so that they can be discretely studied and categorized (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005, 11). Intelligence is judged on recall and a predetermined baseline of what should be known, regardless of the information's practical use (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005, 11). Even those Westerners who sought to study Indigenous groups invariably framed their practices as 'cultural' rather than valid intelligence (Battiste 1998, 22). This view of Indigenous groups as less developed and lacking 'universal' knowledge legitimized the idea that only European consciousness allowed for progress, and that all other groups had stagnated and frozen as their developments did not exactly match the history of Europe

(Battiste and Henderson 2009, 6). Such rejection allowed for self-fulfilling justification, as any similar technologies and discoveries were not recognized, allowing Europe to take ownership of all artistic and scientific developments even when other groups had made these advancements simultaneously or earlier (Battiste 1998, 7). The perceived superiority was, and remains, not exclusive to phenomenological factors. Indigenous epistemology is largely based in interpreting the landscape and other elements of the natural world to gain ever-evolving understanding; a contrast to the static categorization of Western knowledge, utilizing the apparently 'objective' scientific method (Battiste 1998, 2). Further, European ontology is heavily biased towards anthropocentrism, while Indigenous groups varyingly hold theories of animism and the holistic nature of the ecosystem, humans being one aspect among thousands (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005, 11).

Connecting Lévi-Strauss's bricolage to the idea of divergent knowledge systems raises several key questions regarding the status of Indigenous myths in the wake of colonialism. First, it is pertinent to outline exactly how bricolage operates in colonial contact. As a community engages with new information, that piece of knowledge is necessarily contextualized within their pre-existing conceptions of the world. In the case of colonialism, this involves Indigenous ideas being introduced to Western groups and thus being interpreted through an entirely new, disparate framework of knowledge. As such, approaches that would have originally been closely connected to understandings of the landscape and generational wisdom are brought into a starkly diagnostic framework. The original Indigenous concepts are here transformed by pre-existing Western views of the world, and as such they are highly distorted. The same occurs in First Nations interpretations of Western ideas, as exemplified in how Christianity transformed through colonial contact. These changes can clearly be seen in cases such as the bunyip. As already demonstrated in this analysis, the creature began as an aspect of the Dreaming with a complex ontology, but through colonial perception was regarded as a taxonomically viable creature. According to Lévi-Strauss's description of bricolage, both these versions of the banib/bunyip myth are valid and co-existent. However, this assertion gains extra implications when applied to Western interpretations of First Nations traditions. The power dynamic between the two parties is inherently uneven, with countless Indigenous cultures either entirely destroyed or deeply changed by colonialism and the domination of Western approaches to knowledge. While bricolage asserts that the banib and the bunyip are equally legitimate in approach, it is unavoidable that the colonial approach is far more widely distributed while the original Indigenous version grows increasingly obscure. As such, it must be questioned whether the two versions can truly be considered equal, or whether it must be acknowledged that the advent of the Western version is a symptom of wider colonial oppression of First Nations cultures. Bricolage does not exist in an anthropological vacuum; the cultural nuances of its subject matter continue to exist even as the framework is applied. To end an analysis of a spirit-being such as the bunyip without considering its original context is disingenuous. Bricolage must not be utilized as a justification for colonial interpretations, but as an argument for the preservation and dissemination of Indigenous cultural concepts.

Conclusion

Comparing Indigenous and Western versions of the creature known as the banib, mulyawonk, or bunyip provides a significant case study for the application of Lévi-Strauss's bricolage in colonized myths. While a basic consideration of the framework would consider both the Indigenous and Western versions of such a concept to be of equal legitimacy, the power dynamic between respective knowledge systems demonstrates that the matter is far more complicated. In the case of the myth described in this article, while the bunyip is a well-known Australian cryptid, its Aboriginal versions have become obscure, relegated to the groups with which they originated and rarely discussed elsewhere. While differing versions of a myth may be egalitarian in the validity of their narratives, their social and anthropological contexts may differ wildly. To discount this in comparisons of folklore would be a disservice. This article has utilized the 'bunyip' to demonstrate how biases of worldview and existing understandings of folklore affect the ways in which Indigenous concepts are colonized alongside their landscapes. Bricolage sees these two mythologies combine into one personification of Australian colonization. In this way, this article has demonstrated that while bricolage is itself an apolitical framework, its real-world application is often highly political and racial in its constructions. These nuances must be taken into consideration to fully understand First Nations spiritualities and ontologies, and the ways in which they have changed in the wake of invasion.

Notes

- ¹ Personal faith among Indigenous populations is naturally as diverse and complex as in any group. This being said, it must be acknowledged that Christianity has historically been used as a tool of oppression of Indigenous Australians, with many members of the Stolen Generation raised in missions that taught Christianity as a truth and viewed Indigenous traditions as primitive.
- ² Several historical accounts mention that Indigenous belief in the creature stops at the Murray River.
- ³ The issue of taxonomy and the bunyip can be further seen in the discovery of a large number of bones found in the Wellington Caves in 1830. When put back together, the resulting skeleton resembled a large wombat, over three metres in length and two metres in height. As such, word quickly spread about the possibility of some great beast not yet accounted for by naturalists. With the pre-existing influence of the bunyip legend, it is no surprise that the famous monster was claimed as the source. In reality, the bones belonged to the *Diprotodon*, an extinct genus of megafauna ancestral to the wombat. It lived through much of the Pleistocene epoch but died out around 46,000 years ago, meaning that the creature existed on the continent alongside Indigenous people for over 20,000 years (Roberts et al. 2001, 1891). Even after its extinction, the *Diprotodon* remained in clear cultural memory for Indigenous people, with them exercising caution around its old habitats: the swamps. This account suggests that the original bunyip, and perhaps buniyps in general, are partially based on a cultural memory of the *Diprotodon* and other megafauna (Holden 2001, 88–89).

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